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AUTHOR Wiggins, Thomas; Langenbach, Michael
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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of additional responsibilities in health, welfare, and recreation suggests the justification of the conceptualization of the elementary school as a total institution. This research was undertaken to investigate the application of Goffman's concept of total institution to the public elementary school. An exploratory field study was used to gather data from a stratified random sample of nine elementary schools in the state of Oklahoma. Findings indicate that schools have a strong tendency to perform as total institutions. This research identifies variables associated with the concept that, in turn, could lead to the systematic testing of specific hypotheses generated from the findings. (Author)

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THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL AS A TOTAL INSTITUTION

by
Thomas Wiggins
Professor of Education and Human Relations
and
Michael Langenbach
Associate Professor of Education

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Abstract:

The proliferation of additional responsibilities in health, welfare, and recreation suggests the justification of the conceptualization of the elementary school as a total institution. This research was undertaken to investigate the application of Goffman's concept of total institution to the public elementary school. An exploratory field study was used to gather data from a stratified random sample of nine elementary schools in the State of Oklahoma. Findings indicate that schools have a strong tenedency to perform as total institutions. This research identifies variables associated with the concept which, in turn, could lead to the systematic testing of specific hypotheses generating from the findings.

Thomas Wiggins
Professor of Education and Human Relations
College of Education
820 Van Vleet Oval
University of Oklahoma
Norman, Oklahoma 73069

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University of Oklahoma

Objectives of the Inquiry

The problem that stimulated this research was the growing awareness on the part of the investigators of the pervasive influence that the public elementary school has upon its student clients and concomitantly upon the immediate neighborhood community which the school serves. The proliferation of major health, welfare, and recreational activities and responsibilities added to the specific learning goals suggest that the elementary school may be conceptualized as a total institution (Katz, 1973; Corwin, 1965; Carnoy, 1974; Illich, 1971; Sieber and Wilder, 1973).

The purpose of the research was to apply Goffman's conceptual model* (Goffman, 1961) of total institution to the elementary school as a public institution. Ancillary applications of the model were made in the external environment of the neighborhood community in order to determine the degree to which the school extended its influence outside of the internal environment.

Methodology

An exploratory field study methodology (Kerlinger, 1973) was employed in gathering the data. Three systematic, day-long observations were made in each of nine elementary schools in the State of Oklahoma. Observable behavior of teachers, administrators, service staff, and students were noted and recorded in writing. These data were classified as to whether or not they fit into one or more of the indices noted in Goffman's conceptual model.

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*Goffman describes total institutions as having the following characteristics: (1) all aspects of life are pursued in the same place and under the same authority, (2) life is carried on in the company of a large group of others, all of whom are generally treated similarly, (3) activities are scheduled being imposed by a system of explicit rules and officials, and (4) all enforced activities make up a single rational plan to fulfill institutional goals.

Data Sources

The public elementary school was the unit of analysis. Data were gathered from nine stratified and randomly selected elementary schools. Schools were stratified on the basis of whether they served low, middle or high socioeconomic status communities (Warner, 1963). Three schools were randomly selected from each of the three stratified groups to make up the total sample of nine schools.

Results and Conclusions

The behavior observed in the schools studied was similar to the behaviors described by Goffman as characteristic of total institutions. Students were involuntary clients. Meals and snacks were commonly served and provided free when necessary. The quantities and types of food were determined by the institution. Rest and even sleep periods were observed. Health services were broad and comprehensive. Students and their families were held strictly accountable for absences and untimely arrivals. Clothing was provided students when necessary, and dress and grooming codes were well defined and enforced. Parents appeared to be directed and guided in a variety of ways to adjust family living styles to the values of the school by means of homework, parent-teacher conferences, school bulletins, and various "adult education" programs.

Observable school activities were generated from an overall school plan called a curriculum which prescribed and directed the formal and informal activities of the school. Also the school assumed a great number of concomitant extra-curricular functions. There were after school and summer functions and activities, transportation, savings programs, school pictures, social hygiene and sex education programs.

Curricula, standards, codes, and other normative implicit and explicit phenomena made up an elaborate system which guided student client behavior. Apparently, there is a trend in the direction of schools assuming greater responsibility for providing services to a wider range of the needs of students. In this sense a school's effectiveness is enhanced by the degree to which it influences the total environmental press affecting student clients, i.e., the degree to which the school is a total institution.

Importance of the Study

The findings of the study indicate a strong tendency for public elementary schools to perform as total institutions. The proliferation of functions or aspects of life traditionally viewed as responsibilities of the family unit or the community are being assumed by the school. This notion generally lends support to a larger body of research which suggests that the elementary school is the principal socializing institution in America (Bridges, 1964; Boguee, 1961; Booth and Bisztray, 1970; Schmuck and Runkel, 1970; Wiggins, 1972; Jamieson and Thomas, 1974).

This exploratory field study has identified institutional phenomena or variables which should lay a groundwork for the systematic and rigorous testing of hypotheses. The characteristics of total institutions identified in the schools studied need to be reexamined in other regions, different schools, and in a larger number of schools. Research needs to be undertaken which will be concerned with the further discovery, isolation, specification, and measurement of the underlying dimensions of the concept of total institution as it applies to the elementary school.

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